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Reflective Skills: Students' Use of their Evaluation of Teaching

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ABSTRACT

An action-research approach was adopted in an effort to improve the researcher's own practice in developing reflective skills of student teachers in evaluating lessons taught. The study involved four pre-service Diploma in Primary Education students on Teaching Practice (TP) at one Primary School in Mutoko District, Zimbabwe, four mentors, two college lecturers who were participant observers and myself (the researcher). Post-lesson observation conferences revealed that the students' ability to be self-critical had been enhanced. An analysis of TP documents also reflected great improvement in the evaluating patterns on both schemes and lesson plans. The insights gained from participating in this action research study are highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

Reflective teaching is becoming a dominant paradigm in teacher education worldwide. Each time one opens a journal on teacher education programmes, one comes across the term "Reflection". This implies that in Zimbabwe, pre-service and in-service courses should aim at preparing students to be reflective practitioners since self-reflection is the "in" thing in teacher preparation. One way in which reflective skills can be maximally used is students' evaluations. Maynard (1997) says that through self-evaluation, students are encouraged to develop an analytical and self-critical approach to practice. Taken in this light, evaluation can then become an effective tool for making judgments and decisions for future actions.

Student teachers do not automatically become independent reflective practitioners without having been exposed to the practice (Maynard, 1997). This has implications for the teacher educator who cannot simply provide for self-reflection without demonstrating it in action (Elbaz, 1988; Ashcroft

and Griffiths, 1989). It therefore becomes necessary for the college and university lecturer to understand the meaning of reflection so that he or she can confidently assist the student teachers to develop reflective skills.

WHAT IS REFLECTION?

Definitions of reflection are varied and many. Pennington (1992) in Farrell (1998:10) defines reflective teaching as "deliberating on experience, and that of mirroring experience". De Jong and Korthagen (1988) in Wubbels and Korthagen (1990) are also of the view that a person is reflecting when he or she is engaged in structuring his or her perception of a situation, of his or her actions or learning, or when this individual is engaged in altering or adjusting these structures. Both definitions show that reflection is not passive and static but is something which must be approached with rigour so as to effectively "look back" on one's performance in order to adjust. Reflection can therefore be said to be a learning experience since there is need for careful consideration of actions in order to come up with relevant alternatives of improving learning outcomes. As opposed to routine action which is guided primarily by "tradition, external authority and circumstances", reflective action "entails the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge" (Zeichner and Liston 1987, in Farrell, 1998:11)

TYPES OF REFLECTION

There are several approaches to the study of reflective practice. Below is a table which gives a summary of the major approaches (Adapted from Farrell, 1998:11).

Reflection Type and Author	Content of Reflection
Technical Rationality (Schulman, 1987; VanMannen, 1977)	Examining one's use of skills and immediate behaviours in teaching with an established research/theory base.
Reflection-in-action (Schon, 1983; 1987)	Dealing with on-the-spot professional problems as they occur. Thinking can be recalled and then shared later.
Reflection-on-action (Schon 1983, 1987; Hatton and Smith 1995; Gore and Zeichner, 1991)	Recalling one's teaching after the class. Teacher gives reasons for his/her actions/behaviours in class.
Reflection-for action (Killon and Todnew, 1991)	Proactive thinking in order to guide future action.
Action Research (Carr and Kemmis, 1986)	Self-reflective enquiry by participants in social settings to improve practice

According to Farrell (1998), technical rationality is used by beginning teachers who start to examine their skills in an effort to cope with the new classroom situation with immediate feedback from teacher educators. The focus of reflection is on effective application of skills and technical knowledge as well as cognitive aspects of teaching.

The second type is Schon's reflection-in-action, which is that type of reflection whereby the teacher reflects on his or her spontaneous ways of thinking and acting in the middle of action. This is a formative type of evaluation which can be acted upon as the action transpires. Killon and Todnew (1991) say that after planning, the teacher should observe action as if he or she is outside the action itself in order to create meaning. This perspective helps the teacher to establish the cause and effect relationship that occurs between the actions and the responses of students to his or her behaviour. In the classroom situation, a student teacher can tell from the children's responses that no meaningful learning is going on and thus restructure his or her teaching techniques as the lesson progresses rather

than wait for the end of the lesson. Pollard and Tann (1993:15) assert that when someone reflects-in-action, "he is not dependent on categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case".

Reflection-on-action simply means that reflection on one's actions and thoughts is done after the practice is completed. Farrell (1998) says this type of reflection deals with "thinking back" on what has been done and it includes reflection on our reflection-in-action. Students' lesson and scheme evaluations are mainly based on this type of reflection.

Killon and Todnew (1991) suggest another type of reflection which they term reflection-for-action, which is the desired outcome of both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. The authors argue that:

We undertake reflection, not so much to visit the past or to become aware of the metacognitive process one is experiencing (both noble reasons in themselves) but to guide future action (the more practical purpose). (Killon and Todnew, 1991 in Farrell, 1998:12)

Reflection should then be seen to encompass all time designations namely past, present and future simultaneously. While examining our past and present actions, we generate knowledge that will inform our future. The intention of this study was to assist students to avoid the technical way of writing scheme and lesson plan evaluation by looking back to find out what went wrong (reflection-on-action) so as to improve and achieve the desired change (reflection-for-action).

The fifth notion according to Farrell's (1998) table is connected to action research, which Carr and Kemmis (1986) say is a form of self-reflective enquiry which is undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own educational practices, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out.

The action research approach was used in this study in an effort to find ways of assisting student teachers to be genuine in their evaluations, and to use these for improving future practice.

RATIONALE FOR THE REFLECTIVE TEACHER APPROACH IN THIS STUDY ON TEACHING PRACTICE SUPERVISION

The action research approach was adopted for this study because it calls for personal and professional transformation (Ndamba, 1999; Mills, 2000). Although Cohen and Alroi (1981) express their opinion that action research is amateurish and based on common sense, they go on to acknowledge that it has several advantages, among which are that its purpose is practical and immediate and that the findings of such small scale intervention directly concern the instructor's own students. Cohen and Alroi go further to say that action research is one of the ways to diversify the professional life of the educator who is tired of routine. The same sentiments are echoed by Wellington (1991:4) who calls on educators to become reflective practitioners by saying, "reflective practice, like a tenacious wildflower in the city, vibrates with vitality, raising our awareness and calling us from passivity to action".

Triggered by the desire to become a reflective practitioner, I invited two fellow lecturers to collaborate with me, so that the process of reflection could be enhanced in an effort to improve my own practice. Teaching practice supervision had become routine on my part and what I usually did was to tell students what mistakes they had made without giving them any chance to say their opinion about the lesson taught. This left the students with no skills of self-evaluation, particularly in the absence of the supervisor. Tomlinson (1995:44) says students should not be simply told what is right/good versus wrong/bad about what they have done, but should be assisted to "analyse the nature of the effects and the how and why". Assisting the student teacher to analyse and reflect systematically is crucial as this then flows naturally into the next phase of the teaching cycle, which is (re-) planning of future lessons.

The rationale for selecting the question on evaluation was based on my experience in Teaching Practice supervision, where I have observed that evaluation is an important area which needs attention as a professional skill. Evaluation is done as mere narration of events and students are not self-critical in ascertaining why the lesson was not a success. Most student teachers fall into the routine trap of always commenting that "the lesson was a success" and there are no indicators that evaluations are used for future plans. There is usually no match between evaluation and the lesson

taught. This shows that there is disjunction between college aims and what is actually practised by student teachers. Kasambira (1993) says that what constitutes "meaningful" evaluation is self-analysis in the act of teaching.

Hopkins (1985) believes that the research problem undertaken by the teacher should be one to which he or she is committed. Having established that the quality of students' evaluations was a cause for concern to me and many other teacher educators, I based my study on the following research questions:

What can we do to help students on teaching practice to be genuine and not routinise their evaluations?

How can we assist students to adjust schemes and use lesson plan evaluations for future plans?

PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY

Lecturers

Two of my colleagues, one from the Environmental Science Department and the other from the English Department were both involved as participant observers. Mansfield (1988) says the colleagues can be used as observers for self-monitoring. These partners, who should be people with whom the teacher researcher can work comfortably, are necessary for providing the well needed support in developing one's practice (Hopkins, 1985). Collaboration is essential since it has the potential to bring about change in an institution. Oldroyd and Tiller (1987:23) argue that:

Collaboration between colleagues within an institution can produce the "critical mass" of change which will potentially spread into other formal and informal groups within the institution as the members of the collaborating action research group provide a flow of discussions, ideas and proposals when they meet colleagues in other work situations

Student teachers

Four student teachers voluntarily participated in the study. These students collaborated in pairs by observing each other's lessons and making comments during post-lesson observation discussions. Reflection can best

be achieved by involving students in teamwork where they collaborate with colleagues and reflect together in a group or in pairs. Stones (1979) says if we accept that a preliminary to competent performance is the ability to identify competent performance in other people, then student teachers should be afforded the opportunities to analyse and comment on the performance of others, opportunities which are not found in abundance during teaching practice (Mansfield, 1988). It was explained to students that the exercise was pure supervision and that no marks would be awarded. This created a non-threatening environment as opposed to when there is criticism and assessment. Mansfield (1988) argues that it is the responsibility of supervisors to support student development and not merely to assess it.

Mentors

Four mentors, all female, participated in this study. These were identified by the School Head as being competent infant school teachers. Each mentor would observe the lesson being taught by her student teacher, alongside the lecturers, and she would give feedback during post-lesson observation conferences. The role of mentors in the student teachers' professional development cannot be underplayed since they are better placed to assist students as they are with them most of the time during school experience. Maynard (1997) considers observation of students and giving feedback as some of the most valuable strategies that mentors can use in supporting students' development.

DATA COLLECTION

Qualitative data were collected using face to face interviews, open-ended questionnaires, observation and tape recordings.

The school head as well as mentors were interviewed during the initial review, which was done before the study started in order for me to establish whether my questions about students' difficulty in evaluating critically were genuine according to school based supervisors.

Open-ended questionnaires were administered to students during initial review to ascertain whether my concerns were justified so that I could plan to take the appropriate action. After the research, students were again given questionnaires which did not restrict them, so that I could establish how

much they had benefited from the project. Each time students were given blank sheets of paper on which to respond to the eight questions given. I would sit with them in the room where they were completing the questionnaires in order to clarify anything they might not be clear about. At the end of the study, mentors and fellow lecturers also provided data by way of completing comment forms on what they felt about the value of the research.

My fellow lecturers made notes on scheme and lesson evaluations in students' files to give a continuous account of students' progress. They also made notes on lesson observations. I kept a journal where I made entries on my observations. This served as useful data during our reflection sessions with my colleagues.

Tape recordings were done during post-lesson observation discussions and served as useful data to establish how far students could note their strengths and weaknesses after their lesson presentation. Collaboration was also at its peak as student colleagues, mentors and lecturers all shared ideas for the benefit of everybody involved. My colleagues also made notes during post-lesson observation discussions which were focused on my own activities as I interacted with student teachers in a bid to assist them to become reflective in their evaluations.

PROCEDURES IN CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH

The research was carried out over twenty (20) days. Each one of the four students was observed four times while teaching English and Environmental Science. During English lessons, the English specialist was the participant observer whilst the Environmental Science expert worked with me during Environmental Science lessons. Students would observe each other's lessons while mentors were involved throughout in observing their own students teaching. In all cases, observers were provided with blank sheets of paper on which to record their observations, while focusing on students' strengths and weaknesses on (a) achievement of lesson objectives, (b) class organization and management, (c) general teaching strategies (d) sensitivity to pupil needs and any other issues considered pertinent. These issues for consideration had been discussed with all the parties concerned before lesson observations started. All observations made, including those on students' evaluation in their files, were discussed during post-lesson observation conferences.

The cycle followed during this action research was review, plan, act and monitor, review (adopted from Edwards and Collison, 1996). There could be several models of cyclical processes which characterize professional reflection, but Edwards and Collison say what is important is to do it, and not to grapple with models provided by other people since these are all meant to enable teachers to "monitor, evaluate and revise their own practice continuously" (Pollard and Tann 1993:9). Articles by Wood (1988); Ashcroft and Griffiths (1989), Mansfield (1988), Carr and Kemmis (1986), Winter (1989), among others, were helpful sources in guiding me at each stage of the study in respect of action research cycles.

Stage one: Initial review

This stage consisted of data which, when analysed and evaluated, would guide me in my planning stage on which action to take. The information was gathered through interviews with the school head and mentors, as well as responses to open ended questionnaires for student teachers. The following are responses to those instruments, which sought to elicit information about student teachers' prevailing practices in scheme and lesson evaluations.

School head's responses to the interview

All the responses by the school head indicated that student teachers had problems with their evaluations which were not self-critical. He noted that there was no link between objectives and evaluation. He also said that he believed students were not genuine in order to avoid remediation and extra work by re-teaching the lesson and adjusting schemes. He suggested that the period of scheming had to be shortened, for example scheming for only three week in advance, to enable students to adjust schemes when the need arose.

Mentors' responses to interviews

All the four mentors said student teachers did not at all make use of their evaluation for future purposes because they were not genuine in the first place. Students in this study rarely asked for help from mentors on how to evaluate poorly conducted lessons. All the mentors mentioned that it was the student teacher who was supposed to feel free to consult first before and after lesson delivery. They all emphasized the need for collaboration

between the mentor and the student in order to help the student to become self-critical. One mentor said the type of collaboration could be such that she evaluates the student's lesson while the student evaluates hers since she could also learn from the student. Other responses were that a mentor should be exemplary by re-teaching a poor lesson so that the student could learn to become self-critical. Collaboration could also be extended to college lecturers and mentors because there was fear that what the mentor said might not be what the lecturer wanted.

Students' responses to open-ended questionnaires

Students were asked about the aspects that they considered when evaluating schemes and lesson plans. Responses showed that although students had an idea about what to evaluate, there was a mix up and it was evident that they did not know specifically what to evaluate in each case. This information was important for us so that observations could be focused on how to assist students to evaluate accordingly.

On whether they were genuine in their evaluations or that they just did it as routine to please their supervisors, all the four students were open enough to admit that they were not always genuine and that their evaluation was done as routine. Interesting responses were made, some of which included the following:

Sometimes I also fail to say the truth because if I continue to say the lesson was a flop, it would appear as if the teacher is the major problem.

Telling the truth on lessons not done seems to add work on already too much a load. Because of this, such lessons are evaluated just to please the lecturer.

I am genuine in most cases but because of not knowing what to say or write, I sometimes end up doing it to please my supervisor because I cannot leave the space for evaluation blank. Evaluation is the most difficult aspect of the lesson. Personally it takes me twenty or more minutes to evaluate a lesson.

I don't really know what to write.

These diverse responses give a picture that students were not genuine in their evaluations for a variety of reasons.

When asked to what extent they used their evaluations to guide their future plans, two students said they made use of their lesson plan evaluation to a limited extent, while the other two said they rarely used their evaluations. All students said they had never adjusted their schemes of work.

On problems that they faced when evaluating, all students said they did not know what to write.

Students were required to suggest what could be done to improve their evaluation skills both at college level and during TP. Students stressed the need for a handout on how to evaluate so that they get to know college expectations and that peer group teaching should also focus on evaluations. One student actually said, " Surprisingly students are given handouts on lesson plans but these are not evaluated to show how students should evaluate. There should be a lecture on evaluation, just like on scheming and planning".

During TP, all students highlighted the need for mentors, school heads and lecturers to assist them. Mentors could read students' evaluations and comment or they could write their own evaluations for students to read. Another alternative suggested was that the student and mentor could evaluate together. Three students also reiterated the necessity for discussions with visiting lecturers, not simply writing comments which students could not interpret.

The overall impression that I got from students' responses during this initial review stage was that students were not genuine in their evaluations and that they did not make use of these evaluations for future purposes. Students were also not very clear about college expectations since they did not know what to write in both scheme and lesson plan evaluations. Mentors were generally said to be willing to assist, but students voiced concern over the need for more collaboration between students and lecturers. The school head was reflected as not providing sufficient guidance, an element which is crucial in TP supervision in order to greatly influence the effectiveness of student teachers. Where their work was monitored, students maintained a consistent level of work and performance (Shumba, 1991).

Coupled with data from interviews and questionnaires were observations that my two colleagues and I made in students' TP files. Lesson plans in

particular were characterized by comments such as that the lesson evaluations were not at all diagnostic and analytical. Convinced that my research question was justified, the initial review findings guided my next stage, where I had to map out strategies to meet my objectives of assisting students to be genuine and to use their evaluations for improving future practice.

Stage 2 : Planning

The initial plan was that the student was going to teach while his or her colleague, mentor, my fellow lecturer (participant observer) and myself were observing. The lesson would be audio recorded for reflection purposes. The idea of tape recording lessons had to be discontinued after the first observation because of a number of problems. The first was that it took too long to play back the tape, especially that some lessons were one hour long (Environmental Science). This would have meant spending the whole afternoon listening to those tapes and yet students had to prepare for the following days' work and they also had other school commitments. The second problem was that the sound quality was poor because pupils were far from the recorder and only a few pupils' responses could be picked. The greater part of Environmental Science lessons had to be done outside and sometimes it meant walking to some relevant site outside the school yard and all this created problems of audio taping. When we abandoned the audio recording of lessons, the revised plan was to audio tape the post-lesson observation conferences so that these discussions could be used to reflect and monitor students' progress in being self-critical.

Stage 3: Action and Monitoring

Edwards and Collison (1996) say that teacher researchers seeking to improve their own practice operate at two levels, namely, acting and monitoring their actions and the effect of these actions on the student teachers and also on the children. Before the students began to teach, brief pre-observation discussions were held. Students taught while all those observing were taking down notes. Previous evaluations would be scrutinized and comments made about them during the post-lesson observation discussions. During feedback time, the student was the first to be given the opportunity to say his or her opinion about his or her lesson, beginning with strengths. This was deliberately done in order to give the student confidence, and

also to show that we were not witch hunting by focusing on the students' weak areas. Students were made aware that strong points were important to note because they (students) could build upon these in order to improve their lessons. The student then proceeded to his or her weaknesses, which he or she could learn from, in order to improve future practice. The student would be guided to suggest possible solutions to his/her shortcomings, and it was pleasing to note that as time went on, students came up with reasonable ideas on how to improve.

During this post-observation conference, the student colleague who had been observing the lesson was the next to be given chance to contribute, also highlighting his or her colleague's strengths and weaknesses. After that it was the mentor, myself and finally the participant observer to add any issues considered pertinent. During the first post-lesson observation discussion, one student wondered how she could note her own mistakes. After all other observers had made some comments as to her strengths and weaknesses in the lesson taught, she could easily suggest how she could have improved. She acknowledged that the discussion was an eye-opener. On subsequent occasions, students could identify their weaknesses without any problems. It was interesting to note that observations made by students about their own lessons were more or less the same as those noted by lecturers and other observers. To me this meant that it is possible to elicit students' views than telling them what is wrong.

Each time during the post-lesson observation conference, my fellow lecturers would mention their observations on lesson and scheme evaluations to show the degree to which students were improving. This was done by citing specific examples of lessons and scheme evaluations which were showing signs of improvement. To begin with I concentrated on lesson plan evaluations until one of my colleagues pointed out to me, during our own discussions, that I was neglecting the scheme evaluation which students tended to mix up because they did not seem to know the distinction between the two. This led us to focus on the differences between lesson and scheme evaluation during the subsequent discussions. It had been noted that most scheme evaluations were a duplication of lesson evaluations. We used the college mentor's guide where the scheme and lesson evaluations are well laid out. It was however disturbing to note that mentors did not have a

copy. Mentors appreciated our post-observation conferences which they said enlightened them on their duties which they did not know before since some lecturers did not include them in their post-observation discussions with students.

Another role played by my colleagues during post-lesson observation discussions was to observe the way I interacted with students in an effort to improve their scheme and lesson evaluations for future purposes. Notable from my colleague's notes was the probing questions which I asked, which were important for eliciting students' ideas. They also noted that I was able to handle defensiveness from students by asking them for suggestions on how they could improve their lessons. However, these participant observers noted that students were not inquisitive since they did not ask any questions either for clarity or for enrichment. This shows that our students have not been brought up in a culture where they were reflective learners who ask questions.

Post lesson-observation conferences were beneficial for monitoring progress made by students not only in their evaluations but also their class management skills and other issues. One case in point was when both mentor and student were worried about discipline in their class, and the panel suggested that they should change the sitting plan in order to separate impossible children.

Stage 4: Review

Data collected during this stage was meant to establish the learning and expertise developed by all participants as a result of their involvement in the action research project. Student teachers were once again asked to complete eight open-ended questions, mainly based on the first questionnaire which they had completed during initial review.

Mentors wrote comments on what they felt they learnt from the project and also how they thought students had benefited from it. My colleagues wrote reports on their views about the whole exercise.

Mentors' comments on post-practice

Mentors were asked to comment on the following:

How useful has this exercise been to:

- a) you as a mentor?
- b) the student teacher?
- c) Mentors were also asked to add any other comments considered pertinent about the action research study.

It turned out that mentors said they had benefited more than we had anticipated. All the four pointed out that they now knew what was expected by the college and that discussions helped them improve their working relationships with student teachers.

Two mentors mentioned that the exercise had assisted them to learn how to become self-critical themselves, something which they said they never used to do before. Other isolated responses included that they were now able to note mistakes, now they could assist students more effectively and that both student and mentor would now assist children better.

Commenting on whether the students had benefited from this project, all the mentors said students could now identify their strengths and weaknesses, whereas before they used to focus on children's strengths and weaknesses. In two cases it was said students had also improved their teaching methods and other responses included that they had gained help and experience by being observed by many lecturers.

The section on any other comments revealed that the study was quite educative for both mentors and students in improving their teaching methods as indicated by three mentors. However, one mentor noted that although the study involved a lot of work, it should have taken a much longer period for more meaningful change to occur. She suggested three months. Two mentors noted the need to develop reflective skills for all students in that school.

Students' Responses

After the supervision exercise, students were asked to write what they then considered when evaluating schemes and lesson plans. In all cases, students' responses indicated a more focused distinction between scheme and lesson evaluation, and in each case, it is evident that students considered being self critical for the purpose of improving future practice.

On whether they would now be genuine in their future evaluations and why, a variety of responses were given. Some students pointed out that they had learnt that there was no harm in telling the truth when evaluating, while others noted that they now knew what to consider. By being genuine, argued all the students, they could note their own weaknesses so as to improve their teaching and grow professionally.

In response to how they were going to use their evaluations for future plans, all students suggested re-teaching of lessons and adjusting schemes.

When students were required to state whether they found mentors and lecturers to be of any assistance in developing their self-critical skills during the study, all students said they found both lecturers and mentors of much assistance in developing reflective skills. One said the mentor, who had not been of much help before, this time assisted a lot in developing the student's self-critical skills.

When asked whether they still faced problems when evaluating, all the students said they were now clear on what to evaluate, and they no longer faced those problems which they experienced before.

Students were asked to state whether mentors and lecturers helped them to improve their reflective skills in evaluations and how. Although the responses were diverse, they all pointed towards how students had positively gained from experience, particularly post-observation discussions. Other responses included the following:

Previously I did not know that a teacher is able to criticize herself for the benefit of the child.

Previously I was afraid of saying the truth.

Through these discussions, one could easily pick one or two things from suggestions given, and by doing so the skills were improved.

I gained more evaluation skills by attending someone's lesson. This helped me to identify all areas of the lesson and how we should deal with them when evaluating.

On any other comments, students were also asked to state what they liked best/least about the study.

Two students indicated that they particularly appreciated the confidence gained by teaching in front of two lecturers, a mentor and a student colleague. The other two said they liked the idea of having gained the experience of how to evaluate critically in order to improve, and one went further to say, "From our discussions on lessons taught, I discovered that there is rarely a perfect lesson, so true evaluations will help us grow in the profession..." Other comments touched on the help received from lecturers and mentors and how this assisted them to prepare well for the lessons.

On what they liked least about the study, only one student indicated that the exercise should have included all students on T.P. at that school, so that they could also benefit. The fact that not all students said what they liked least about the project is also indicative of the fact that their skills on criticizing events still need to be developed.

The general impression that one gets after reading through students' responses under the review stage is that students benefited from this exercise to a reasonable extent. This helped me to establish that the study was a worthwhile exercise, basing on students' mentors' and my colleagues' reports. Observation of students' files also reflected a great improvement on scheme and lesson evaluations, which were initially characterized by lack of detail and clarity, and also by absence of the aspect of self-criticism.

Students were asked to pull out any lesson plan which they felt was not diagnostic and analytical and any other which they wrote after gaining reflective skills. A close analysis of these two sets of students' evaluations shows a great improvement in students' evaluative skills, particularly the ability to note their shortcomings and suggesting how they could have improved for the benefit of future practice.

Reports by fellow lecturers who were participant observers

Both emphasized that collaboration should be underscored, and one of them went further to say that, "Student teachers got an opportunity to cross-pollinate ideas with lecturers in an atmosphere completely devoid of tension, mistrust and anxiety". Both also felt that mentors gave valuable advice to student teachers and yet usually they are sidelined by lecturers. One of them wrote that he had been one such lecturer who sometimes bypassed mentors during post-observation discussions with students. My colleagues felt that the exercise was quite fruitful since they noted a great

improvement in students' evaluative skills. They also expressed that they appreciated the idea of being part of an action research study, which one of them said he only knew in theory after learning about it at the University of Zimbabwe while doing a post graduate diploma in Science Education in 1997. However, one was of the opinion that the video tapes could have been ideal for developing students' reflective skills, while the other thought the project should have taken longer in order to cover more teaching subjects. These are both noble suggestions which we could consider if we were to carry out a similar action research study.

WHAT DID I AND OTHERS LEARN?

Viewing myself as a 'researcher' in a bid to improve my own supervision skills was new to me. I got the opportunity to balance my knowledge of educational research with my day-to-day experience of teaching practice supervision. This compelled me to focus carefully on the plan, act, observe and reflect phases of action research in order to develop my students' reflective skills in scheme and lesson plan evaluations. As a result, a number of important changes occurred in my professional skills and belief systems.

The study helped me to sharpen my supervision skills at each stage of the action research process, particularly my observation skills, eliciting student responses, balancing positive and negative comments in student performance and handling student defensiveness. Although the initial plan was unsuccessful, I was able to remain focused on my goals. The cyclical nature of action research allowed me to plan and re-plan, resulting in activities that were more dynamic in subsequent post-lesson observation conferences. Having two colleagues who were always available provided many opportunities for me to collect data through daily examination of students' evaluations, lesson observations and feedback sessions, all of which provided valuable evidence on changes in the students' evaluating patterns. Keeping and using a journal for the first time assisted me to become a better thinker because I would probe deeper into my own supervision techniques and actions. Through the use of audio-taped data from post lesson observation conferences, I could note my own progress as well as my students' as they became more and more self-critical. I also became more receptive to suggestions and observations made by my colleagues.

The outcome of this action research project contradicted my beliefs and this led me to question my philosophy of teaching practice supervision and how I thought students learn how to teach. Prior to this study, I believed in transmission of information by always telling students how their lesson went without giving them chance to state their views. I have now learnt that if students are given the opportunity to identify their own strengths and weaknesses and to suggest possible solutions, they can easily pick the skills with the help of others. This proved to me that student transformation can occur through reflection and dialogue (Yost, Sentner and Forlenza-Baily, 2000; Weiler, Gadzirayi and Mkondo, 2002). I believe that my action research was critical to my current understanding of reflection and my commitment to its practice. It was not only a question of transforming practice but I also felt transformed myself.

There was actually a lot that my colleagues and I learnt from this exercise, but it is not possible to exhaust everything. Our knowledge and confidence as teacher educators were improved. I personally derived joy from participating in this action research project, particularly the experience of working as a team, which I had never done before. I now fully concur with Francis (1995) in Farrell (1998:13) who says that critical friends can "stimulate, clarify and extend thinking.....and feel accountable for their own growth and peers' growth". This involvement of lecturers, mentors and student teachers working as a team to improve practice has proved to us that collaboration works.

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NOTES

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